

The Power and Control Dynamics of Growing Up in an Abrahamic Faith Environment

An Academic Conference Presentation Paper By

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Abstract: *Family and religion have been shown to be important to the majority of people in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Numerous research studies suggest that childhood relationships and environment are influential to mental health and well-being, with research on religious families significantly increasing in the last few decades. The purpose of this study is to explore counselors' experiences of the influence of a fundamentalist religious upbringing on mental health and well-being in adulthood, across the Abrahamic traditions within the United Kingdom. The primary objectives are to psycho-educate professionals to recognize and understand the influence of a fundamentalist religious upbringing on mental health and well-being in adulthood, and to add to the sparse literature on this largely hidden topic. In-depth, qualitative, non-structured interviews were conducted with eight counselors (one withdrew at pre-analysis stage), who were collaborative co-researchers throughout the process. The focus of this article aligns with one of the interpretative readings of the interview transcripts undertaken by the researcher and co-researchers during the research process, namely appraising issues of power and control. The author outlines her insider researcher background, chosen methodology, co-researcher recruitment, and ethical considerations, before sharing the co-researchers' stories around the power and control dynamics of a fundamentalist religious upbringing. The co-researchers' adult religiosity is briefly outlined, before some brief reflections conclude the article.*

Keywords: Power, Control, Fundamentalism, Religion, Mental Health, Religious Trauma

Introduction

Maybe the journey isn't so much about becoming anything. Maybe it's about unbecoming anything that really isn't you so that you can become who you were meant to be in the first place.¹ The focus of this article is on one aspect of the findings of my doctoral research project,

¹ Attributed to Paulo Coelho.

called “Both Sides of the Coin: A Narrative Exploration of the Influence of a Fundamentalist Religious Upbringing on Mental Health and Well-Being in Adulthood.” The author originally presented on one aspect of the findings with the talk, “The Power and Control Dynamics of Growing Up in an Abrahamic Faith Environment” at the Global Center for Religious Research’s International eConference on Atheism in September 2020, and the information presented then will form the basis of this article.

Being an “insider researcher” has provided the author with the very personal answer to one frequently asked question in academic circles, namely “Why does this research matter?” Indeed, her own developmental experiences have been the bedrock on which her doctoral work of the last four years has been built, and have provided the resilience to cope with the onerous, rigorous demands of engaging in such a personally relevant research project. Born in the mid-1950s in a small town in Wales, in the United Kingdom, the second child of a working-class family, the author recalls her early years as being happy and secure. This was because her family was historically and multi-generationally steeped in chapel religiosity dating back to the Welsh Christian revival (1904–05), and they lived in a small community where everybody cared for everyone else. However, while outward appearances suggested that she was growing up in a loving, secure family environment, the reality was significantly different, following her mother’s radical conversion to a fundamentalist, evangelical Christian, cult-like group when she was just three years old. Following her conversion, her mother became a strict, absolutist, authoritarian disciplinarian, who used aspects of religion as a manipulative tool, with threats that the author would go to hell for minor misdemeanors being common, alongside scary tales of “the second coming of Christ,” and the risk of being “left behind” when the rapture happened. The author’s father, although constantly physically present in her growing-up years, was passive and emotionally absent. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, she now has much more understanding of the imbalance of power and control that were present in her growing-up years, particularly as a child or young person, in comparison to the powerful position that her parents held. It has taken many years of processing the effects of her own religious trauma in therapy and elsewhere, as well as coming to terms with the painful ostracism and shunning she continues to be subjected to by members of her own family-of-origin, once thought to be her “nearest and dearest.” However, she now understands that the family, although no longer religious, continues to operate like a cult, having both “insiders” and “outsiders.”

During this research process she has realized that, while for many years she was convinced that she and her siblings were the only ones who had grown

up in such “a weird religious family,” in fact there are many, many people who have had similar experiences, most of whom have never been able to tell their story to someone who understood. It has therefore become clear that while such research cannot ever be therapy, and rightly so, there can be therapeutic elements to such conversations, and she is privileged to have had the opportunity to speak at great length with each of her co-researchers, who freely shared their own stories as well as some client accounts, suitably anonymized to protect confidentiality.

Methodology

Based on an anti-positivist, constructionist-interpretivist perspective combined with a relativist ontological position, several different qualitative methodologies were initially considered for this study, the priority being to represent the unique stories of participants.² Subsequently, a relational-centered³ reflexive, collaborative narrative approach was implemented, as it not only integrated key skills that the author uses all the time in her work as a counselor and psychotherapist, but also fully involved co-researchers throughout the whole process. The seven-stage framework of the collaborative narrative approach was adopted in a critically evaluative way, thus neatly “dethron[ing] [her] from the researcher perch.”⁴

As shown in Table 1, at stage 4, transcripts were separately analyzed by the co-researcher and the author prior to a follow-up one-to-one interpretative interview to discuss the individual findings of the four collaborative readings of the transcript. A “pen portrait” was then produced for each co-researcher.⁵

Table 1: The Seven-stage Process of the Collaborative Narrative Approach

Stage 1	Setting the stage
Stage 2	The performance
Stage 3	The transcription process

² Etherington, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher*.

³ Finlay and Evans, *Relational-centred Research*.

⁴ Arvay, *Doing Reflexivity*, 166.

⁵ Hollway and Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*.

Stage 4	Four collaborative interpretations of the transcripts
Stage 5	Setting the stage for the interpretative interview— a collaborative interpretation of the text
Stage 6	Writing the stories
Stage 7	Sharing the stories

Co-Researcher Recruitment

The criteria for participation set out at the recruitment stage was that potential co-researchers needed to be qualified counselors, to have grown up in a fundamentalist religious environment within an Abrahamic tradition, and/or to have worked with clients who had comparable childhoods and to have the capacity to provide written informed consent to participate in the research project. Recruitment was via professional counseling and psychotherapy bodies within the United Kingdom and a counseling training college with which the author is affiliated, the rationale being that recruitment through such gatekeepers would hopefully aid diversity and access participants who might have been reluctant to volunteer to a sole researcher.

During the early stages of the recruitment process, there was overwhelming interest in participation upon advertising, although there was a predominance of counselors who had strict Christian upbringings or had worked with clients with similar childhoods. Twenty counselors underwent online preliminary interviews during summer 2019. Purposeful sampling was then used to gain as much diversity of representation across the Abrahamic religions as possible, with a single sample representation of one Jewish and one Muslim counselor and the remainder having had some form of Christian upbringing. Eight of the counselors who had indicated their willingness to proceed became co-researchers (one later withdrew at pre-analysis stage). The co-researchers' details are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Co-researchers' Profiles

<i>Chosen pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age range</i>	<i>Race and ethnicity</i>	<i>Self-identified religion of upbringing</i>
Co-researcher 1 “Holly”	Female	0–59	White British	Christianity: Evangelical Baptist
Co-researcher 2 “Francesca Alexandra”	Female	0–59	White British	Christianity: Pentecostalist
Co-researcher 3 “Hannah”	Female	0–49	White British	Judaism: Liberal
Co-researcher 4 “Olivia”	Female	0–49	White British	Christianity: Pentecostalist
Co-researcher 5 “Eva”	Female	0–49	White British	Christianity: Jehovah’s Witnesses
Co-researcher 6 “Anna”	Female	0–59	White British	Christianity: Evangelical Baptist
Co-researcher 7 “Rupert”	Male	0–69	White British	Christianity: Evangelical Baptist
Co-researcher 8 “Maya”	Female	0–29	Pakistani British	Islam: Sunni

Ethical Considerations

The stance that “all research, whether conducted within a quantitative or qualitative paradigm, must attend to all research ethics,”⁶ was the foundational bedrock for this project. This was crucial, bearing in mind that qualitative research is emotional in nature⁷ and can also be a spiritual experience.⁸ In addition, some researchers argue that religion, spirituality, and mental health are tough topics to research,⁹ and therefore stakeholder analyses and risk assessments were drawn up for all primary and secondary stakeholders. Ethical permission to proceed with this study was granted by the Metanoia Institute and Middlesex University.

In line with the ethical principles of this project, all co-researchers were informed prior to the start of their participation that they had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, including during the thesis write-up period. Eva decided to withdraw prior to the commencement of the analysis stage, and it was mutually agreed that none of the material she had shared would be included in the thesis or emergent products. This agreement adhered to the four principles stated in the research proposal, namely: “respect for the autonomy, privacy, and dignity of individuals and communities, scientific integrity, social responsibility and maximizing benefit and minimizing harm.”¹⁰

Religious Parenting

“It is common practice for parents to raise their children based on their beliefs.”¹¹ Given this quotation, it is not surprising that each one of the co-researchers was brought up with their parents’ religions. The common conceptualization of such a childhood is that it can be beneficial to mental health and well-being given that such children are likely to learn about religion and be involved in religious practices from a young age. Indeed one report revealed that if such beliefs and practices are continued into adulthood, they could aid “emotional stability and the resolution of mental conflict.”¹² Yet, the power and control dynamics of a fundamentalist religious upbringing are frequently

⁶ Reeves, *An Introduction to Counselling*, 416.

⁷ Davis, “The Management of Self,” 37–62.

⁸ Rosenblatt, “Qualitative Research,” 111–128.

⁹ Blazer, “Religion, Spirituality and Mental Health,” 281–91.

¹⁰ The BPS, *Code of Human Research Ethics*, 7.

¹¹ Chen and VanderWeele, “Associations of Religious Upbringing,” 2355.

¹² Hand, cited in Koenig and Larson, “Religion and Mental Health,” 67.

disempowering for children and young people, as can be seen from the co-researchers' stories that follow.

The Power and Control Dynamics of a Fundamentalist Religious Upbringing—Co-Researchers' Stories

Hannah

This co-researcher grew up within a cultural, liberal Jewish family, and her life is still deeply embedded in the practices of Judaism, including the celebration of Jewish festivals with her family and friends. Unlike the other co-researchers, Hannah was encouraged to be an independent, free thinker in her growing-up years and still embraces an empowered, deep-thinking way of being in adulthood. During our interview conversation, she talked about the importance of choice and said, “I feel that I chose very much to be in this lifestyle.” She also shared with the author her belief that “religion can be an absolute power, and I think one has to be very cautious of that, and this maybe connects to what I said about rabbis having power and control and the importance of them not misusing it and ensuring that their power is not taken lightly.” Speaking about always having been immersed in Judaism, she said, “I sort of struggle to what extent religion is about boundaries in an unhelpful way, and what it is about power maybe, and wonder when you’re in the midst of it, can you really come out of it and question it?” As a psychotherapist, Hannah has worked with clients across the Jewish continuum from liberal, cultural Jews like herself to those of a more fundamentalist orthodox or ultra-orthodox affiliation, and talked about the narrow religious environment of such fundamentalism.

Rupert

“A religious upbringing can be a wonderful experience for a child ... religion can offer comfort to children in distress or crisis.”¹³

During interview conversations, Rupert spoke warmly about his fundamentalist Christian upbringing in an evangelical Baptist family, where there were at least three generations of Christians, albeit with a variety of types of churchmanship. He shared his experience of organized religion growing up:

¹³ Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will*, 23.

“My church was a very warm and lively church. There was a lot of good care and teaching in it.” He also said that he was very happy at school and had lots of friends, and “that meant that I went to quite a few non-Christian homes, so I did see another side of life as it were.” He spoke about some of the “all-or-nothing rules”; for example, he was not allowed to play cards for money or gamble, the television had to be off on Sundays, and swearing was prohibited, but his belief is that such rigidity was ameliorated by love. Rupert said that in his developmental years, children and young people had very little power and were frequently silenced out of respect for their elders, as they were regarded as not mature.

Holly

This co-researcher grew up in a multi-generational, evangelical Baptist family and described her parents as teetotal, strongly evangelical, and Bible-believing. She also talked about some “all-or-nothing rules” stating that there were “some restrictions e.g. implicit rules around who I spent time with, but on the other hand I had a real experience of God and had really lovely peer friends at youth group, although quite insular.” Speaking about some of the disempowerment she felt in her developmental years, she described herself as a hurt child and said, “It’s easy to become a Christian in those circumstances ... there’s that vulnerability and it’s there and it’s usually based on the fact that you’re a sinner, rather than you’re loved, which fits into the fundamentalist perspective....It’s driven by fear, and unacceptability and shame.” Holly is a spiritual director and counselor who now works therapeutically with some of the Muslim population in her area.

Eva

Growing up as she did in a Jehovah’s Witnesses family, Eva described herself as “a compliant child and a bit square.” This meant that she was not popular with some of her peers in the religious group who wanted to break free of some of the tight constraints imposed on them. Consequently, during conversations, she spoke about the “them-and-us” culture she was subjected to in her early years: “You were taken from the world, you were different. A bit like the Israelites who used to have a blue fringe at the bottom of their clothes. But also, there was always the feeling that they (adult men) looked down on you and that you weren’t good enough.” In fact, some of the literature suggests that in some religious groups, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, “the relationship

between children and parents is not seen as equal individuals, but one where parents are considered to know best and have a certain authority.”¹⁴ Consequently, there is a hierarchy of God, father, mother, and then the children, who are expected to be respectful and obedient. Eva spoke about the Jehovah’s Witnesses being a male-dominant organization, and explained that women had to wear head coverings if there was any kind of meeting or a gathering where men were present: “Maybe it was before going out to preach we would meet before we went on the door-knocking, we’d call it a meeting for field service … and if no brothers (men), turned up, then the women were allowed to conduct it,” but if any men turned up “she had to cover her head, so invariably a tea towel would be whipped out of the drawer, and they’d put a tea towel on their head.”

It is apparent that Eva also experienced lots of “all-or-nothing” rules in her growing-up years—for example, women were not allowed to wear trousers or celebrate Christmas or birthdays, with homosexuality being viewed as “abhorrent, worse than anything.” She shared also that her behavior was really managed when she became a teenager because “there were always rules about morality and so boys were not allowed to be alone with girls, as we don’t know what might happen if they’re all in one room together.”

She also vividly described the many expectations there were of her:

We had to do Bible study and that was in addition to going through the routines and in addition to preaching, you know there was always something that we had to be expected to do, and then you know we hadn’t done it, do daily texts in the mornings, if they do it at breakfast, read the scripture and then the explanation from the Watchtower and then if we hadn’t done it for a few days we had to catch up and do several days in a row.

Movingly, the co-researcher shared about the disempowerment she experienced in her growing up years: “Within home and family, I just had to fit in, and I had to kind of find my way in what was already a very rigid and entrenched way of life.”

¹⁴ Frisk, “Growing Up,” 73.

Anna

Heimlich argues that one form of religious child maltreatment is “terrifying children with religious concepts, such as an angry and punitive god, eternal damnation, or passion by the devil or by demons....making children feel guilty and shameful by telling them that they are sinful,”¹⁵ and many of these elements are transparent in Anna’s story. Born into an evangelical Baptist family, when describing her upbringing she stated that she was “born into everything church-linked—we lived and breathed it” and she told me that at two or three years old, she was able to recite all the books of the Bible. She described her upbringing as “dogmatic and very clear-cut and literal with no space to move.” There was a literal belief in a seven-day creation and very literal beliefs in heaven and hell: “Hell wasn’t a metaphor, there wasn’t a plan B—it was that or hell really. That was part of the fear.” In addition, her parents had a literal belief in the second coming of Christ with non-believers being “left behind.”

Anna shared that there were lots of rigid rules in her formative years, including saying grace before meals and being forced to pray every day and read the Bible. “It was very much you know, Bible notes and if you missed a couple of days, absolutely oh goodness that was a heavy burden” as the requirement was to have a quiet time each day but “prayer was about the judgment of God fundamentally.” Regular church attendance, twice on Sundays, was mandatory, plus church activities a couple of times each week. Her family mostly socialized with church families, so what went on in her own family was replicated in all the others she saw, including television not being allowed on Sundays, no alcohol, “fiercely teetotal, absolutely no swearing and no sex before marriage.” There was a plethora of “shoulds, oughts, and musts” in place in Anna’s growing-up years, and she became “the good girl who knew the rules, and what it was to feel shame,” the result of which was that she used to regularly confess her sins and repent, plus there were lots of “second conversions.” She talked about “the disempowerment of confession,” and stated that “being kept in the position of a child means being disempowered without any growth.”

This co-researcher also shared that she was fearful of the power expressed in the heavy language used in hymns which she learned growing up. She also talked about the terror she felt at God watching her all the time as expressed in words such as “Be careful little eyes what you see” etc., and about “the power of the Bible, the power of the hierarchy, the God telling me to do

¹⁵ Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will*, 29.

this, or you've been chosen for a reason, or bad things happen because you're destined for, you know it's all power." She shared that growing up she felt that there was no choice: "I didn't know there was a choice. It simply was."

Francesca Alexandra

This participant was brought up in a fundamentalist way in a Christian Pentecostalist church with poor accountability and a mother who was mentally unwell and "grabbed hold of the rigidity of fundamentalism," in Francesca Alexandra's words. She talked about how her mother could be loving and caring one moment but then manipulative the next, and this included misusing scripture. She acknowledged that when she was "naughty" she would be made to sit in the hearth by the fire, while her mother dictated scripture expecting her to repeat it. When she was unable to because her cognition had gone off-line, the whole thing would be repeated: "This was prolonged, prolonged the agony of something I didn't even know what I'd done wrong" and that she would have preferred to have had a smack. "God was terrifyingly all-knowing" and the teaching around sin and hell led to her being hypervigilant and fearful from a young age. She also described how the anti-Christ paralyzed her because it became "the now internalized authoritative power that controlled me and a legacy of fear."

Francesca Alexandra talked about not being allowed to have a voice in her developmental years and not being allowed to question.

Mum was an issue: I was aware of her power over me as a child and as an adult ... that determined every action of mine ... and the good girl again, that's because we were controlled. The authorities of fear ... as a weapon to create converts and to create good behavior ... so don't wear make-up, girls don't wear trousers and don't develop our own thinking skills or voice.

She also talked about the authority of the Bible being used by her mother: "a quiet control—a bit like coercive control." Also, the power and control that was in place regarding music, the result being that "my development, creativity and spontaneity were silenced."

Maya

Maya is of Pakistani ethnicity and grew up in a Sunni Muslim home. She described her growing-up years: "I was constantly in the middle of a war

zone.” She became an independent thinker from a young age and did not agree with a lot of what she saw and heard, especially the violence she witnessed in her family environment, and this had a profound impact on her view of religion. Growing up, she was sent to both a madrassa and mosque, where non-compliance or getting things wrong in class was punished by being hit on the hand with a bamboo stick, she said. She told me about some small moments of victory when she pretended to fall asleep for the whole lesson.

In her words, for Maya there was a complete lack of choice and control growing up, as she was expected to be a Muslim like her family. She shared how the ideologies were forced on her from a young age and she was forced to wear clothing that completely covered her, which seriously impacted her body image in a detrimental way. She told me that in Asian culture, generally parents have huge power over their children, and although Asian women generally are very strong and authoritarian, they are also submissive because Asian men are also authoritarian. This is very unfortunate for the children because they then grow up with two very authoritarian parents. Maya also spoke about the powerlessness of being a child in that environment of gender imbalances and gender inequality, and the unfairness she felt at being told what to wear while men could wear what they wanted to. Whenever she questioned the thinking behind specific practices or in general, the answer she received was always “because God says so.” Touchingly, she summarized her childhood experiences as “an abyss of trauma.”

Co-Researchers and Adult Religiosity

While not the primary focus of this doctoral research project, co-researchers also shared with the author their current position regarding religion in adulthood as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Co-researchers' Adult Religiosity

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Upbringing</i>	<i>Current Faith</i>
Holly	Baptist (works with many Muslim clients)	Christian and attends church regularly
Francesca Alexandra	Pentecostal Christian	Strong Christian faith and a regular church attender
Hannah	Liberal Judaism	Continues to be a practicing Jew which she sees as cultural rather than just religious
Olivia (withdrew at analysis stage)	Pentecostal Christian	Yes
Eva	Jehovah's Witnesses	Left the Jehovah's Witnesses as an adult
Anna	Evangelical Baptist	No longer believes in religion but sees herself as "spiritual"
Rupert	Evangelical Baptist	Continues to be a committed Christian
Maya	Sunni Muslim	No longer a Muslim. Would like to explore spirituality more in due course but is not ready to do so yet

Conclusive Reflections

The stories of the co-researchers, as related above, speak for themselves in terms of the imbalance of power and control in their familial environments during their upbringing. It is important to acknowledge that all early caregivers consciously and unconsciously influence their own children as they grow up,

from “their own cultural and social frames” of reference.¹⁶ It is also crucial to note that each child’s experience of a religious upbringing is “unique and idiosyncratic” with religion being only “one element among many influences in childhood.”¹⁷ It is arguably also essential to have awareness of the tension that religious parents hold, between the “right to give their children a religious upbringing and a duty to avoid indoctrinating them.”¹⁸ Consequently, while parents arguably have “a moral right” to share their religion with their offspring, this potentially “violates the child’s right to an open future,”¹⁹ especially if exclusivist religious beliefs result. Convincingly, Heimlich argues that “the difference between healthy faith and dangerous faith, where children are concerned ... is whether children are living in a religious authoritarian environment”²⁰ in which they are totally controlled and disempowered.

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¹⁶ Frisk, “Growing Up,” 65.

¹⁷ Birtwistle and Smith, *Children Growing Up*, 1.

¹⁸ Hand, “Religious Upbringing Considered,” 545.

¹⁹ Morgan, “Religious Upbringing, Religious Diversity,” 367.

²⁰ Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will*, 20.

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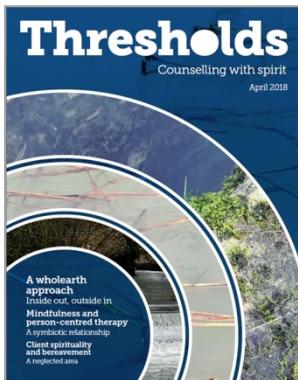
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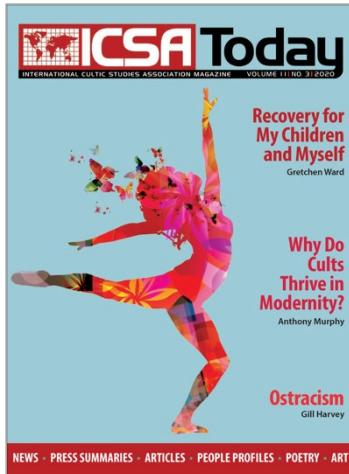
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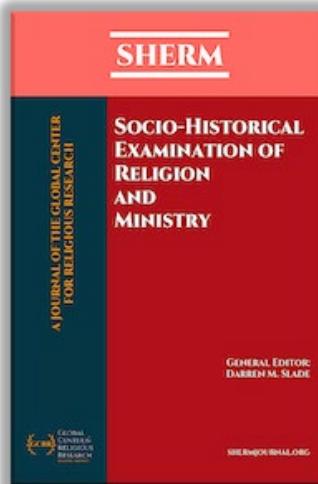
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